



The highlight of BASELWORLD 2005 for many - Classique ref. 7027 'La Tradition Breguet', in yellow gold (SFr.21,700). Inspired by Breguet's historic 'souscription' watches and using one of Breguet's major innovations - the 'pare-chute' balance staff shock protector, from 1790.

# Fanfare

Breguet's 'La Tradition' bridges the past and future in mould-breaking style

James Gurney

The stream of questions concerning the stewardship of the Breguet name has been virtually unceasing since The Swatch Group's acquisition of Groupe Horloger Breguet in 1999. Given Breguet's status as a sacrosanct name in the history of horology this is not too surprising, particularly given The Swatch Group chairman Nicolas Hayek's ebullient lead of the acquisition and subsequent development of Breguet. Surely the man behind Swatch and Flik-Flak can't be allowed custody of Breguet?!

## Critical voices

While the immediate concern with locating and collecting key Breguet pieces for the company was

at least mutely praised, the decision to place the Breguet business within The Swatch Group and alongside Blancpain provided plenty of ammunition for critics who were convinced that Hayek would commercialise the quality and heritage out of Breguet. The suggestion was that Breguet would somehow end up as a producer of well-decorated Omegas.

If the critical voices only came from the ranks of journalists and observers, there would be little to worry about. However, serious collectors of both the original and modern watches also seemed to fight shy of the new Breguet, usually citing vague concerns about the quality or style of finish. Not

Blocky bridges and a stripped-down movement mean La Tradition is simple to the eye, compared with the visual clutter of skeleton watches.

that such sentiments were strong enough to dampen demand for contemporary Breguet watches at auction. Paul Maudesly of Bonhams in London comments, "It seemed as if Hayek and Breguet were to be continually facing the same criticisms, however much effort was put into linking the modern-day brand with horology's great genius of the past."

Calmer heads have been less critical but have still to fall for the new Breguet and perhaps with more reason. The tourbillons and other headline watches of recent years have been beautifully made and absolutely correct in terms of design but have somehow crucially lacked the magical ingredient that would lift Breguet above the likes of Patek Philippe or Audemars Piguet. With the exception of the Reine de Naples, nothing met the not unreasonable demand that Breguet should be over and above the rest. (It should be said that such expectations were not really held during the tenure of Hayek's predecessors; nevertheless, why should anything but the highest standards be used to judge Breguet?) One of the more compelling criticisms focused on the watches' finish, arguing that the style was too generically Swiss in its use of Côte de Genève or skeleton work - should Breguet not have its own style - perhaps more in keeping with the French idiom that Breguet actually worked in?

One thing that seemed to go unnoticed was that Hayek had already had commercial success. His restructuring of the giant core of ASUAG and SSIH into SMH in 1993, which subsequently became The Swatch Group, and his indefatigable drive were key to the continued survival of the Swiss watch industry. Breguet, while expected to be commercially successful, is led by Hayek with other priorities in mind. Hayek seems to be genuinely determined to contribute to the history of Breguet, as he has made clear through such events as last year's Hermitage exhibition in St Petersburg.

### Breaking the mould

Behind the scenes, it seems that the watchmakers and designers at Breguet have been tasked with answering these criticisms

(Left) Though lacking the pare-chute system, this Breguet No. 583 from 1801 illustrates the source of La Tradition's aesthetic inspiration. A 'souscription' watch, the distinctive three-bodied hanging barrel and overhanging escapement arrangement is reflected well by Breguet's new wristwatch. (Image courtesy of Antiquorum.)

(Above) Sold by Antiquorum last year for SFr.86,250, this Breguet No. 30, originally sold in 1798, was one of the earliest produced with the 'pare-chute' balance staff protection device, resurrected on the new La Tradition. (Image courtesy of Antiquorum.)





(Left) Another tribute to Breguet's roots: 2005's replica of the celebrated Breguet No. 5 from 1794, purchased at auction by Nicolas Hayek in 2001 for SFr.1,650,000. The 'Perpétuelle' quarter-striking movement was disassembled, photographed and entirely redrawn for reproduction.

(Middle) New for 2005, the Classique Grande Complication (ref. 3755) skeletonised tourbillon and perpetual calendar in platinum (SFr.220,000).

(Right) Refined and traditional: Breguet's Classique Extra-Plate (ref. 5175) in yellow gold, unveiled at Basel this year (SFr.16,500).

levelled at the brand - although any such suggestion is understandably refuted by Hayek. After three years' work, the fruit of these labours was unveiled amid the hurly-burly of April's BASELWORLD.

It is fair to say that the first reactions to 'La Tradition Breguet' were essentially of shock, swiftly followed by acceptance that Breguet had really broken the mould. Even web forums such as Timezone and the Purists could hardly find a critical word for the new Tradition between them. Even the normally restrained PR department at Breguet noticed that this was somehow momentous, as can be judged from what might just be the most gushing press release ever.

As can be seen from the images, La Tradition is closely based on the iconic

'souscription' watches of the 1790s, even down to a recreation of the 'pare-chute' shock protection system. It might seem strange to have a wristwatch design that recreates the normally unseen workings of a pocket watch but the effect is extraordinary and elegant. The blocky bridges and seemingly stripped-down movement mean the watch is comparatively simple to the eye - an effect helped by the symmetry between the balance wheel and the third wheel. Contrast this with the visual clutter most skeleton watches present, with their mazes of decorated bridges and elaborately engraved plates. For me, though, it is the combination of gilt finish to the movement plates and bridges, and the typical Breguet dial that makes La Tradition so unique and so, well, Breguet.

My first thought was that this was a watch to hold and admire but not to wear. A notion that I was disabused of, the moment I tried the piece on. The open face makes the watch seem larger than the 38 mm it really is. This might not be an everyday watch, but at SFr.21,700, this is not a watch that needs armed security to wear out. The only real poser is to summon the necessary élan to carry the watch off in the style required.

And this is just the beginning, as Breguet is promising a whole family of watches to follow this opener. Time, perhaps, to consult your Daniels' *Art of Breguet* to divine what we might in see in future years? One clue is that price tags for future models will be topping the €150,000 mark, making the current La Tradition look like a modest toe in the water. ○